

Jared Diamond
COLLAPSE: HOW SOCIETIES CHOOSE TO FAIL OR SUCCEED

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reviewed by
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Mankind has been remarkably successful at surviving and succeeding throughout the world. However, there have been disasters and calamities as well as successful civilizations. Men have often destroyed the very environment which nurtured them, whether through over-hunting, or over-grazing. And now, at a time when hurricanes, floods, and droughts, have increased in intensity, one seeks information and insight as to the possible causes and for consequences for human society, not just for natural events, but regarding human activity as well. Professor Jared Diamond has written a serious book to examine such phenomena concerning their social and environmental impacts. He uses detailed information from diverse sources on many societies which have undergone - indeed often caused - important environmental degradation with the result (often) of total disaster for the humans involved. He also documents how some cultures with an enlightened appreciation and knowledge of their own circumstances have survived by working with the natural world to create sustainable societies, successful for many hundreds of years.

Diamond's criteria for the examination throughout the work are: 1) Inadvertent environmental damage and its possible reversibility, 2) Climate change, 3) Hostile Neighbors, 4) Decreased support by friendly neighbors (e.g., the Greenlanders doom will be hastened by their failure to maintain relations with Europe), 5) Society's responses to its problems. Says the author, "A society's responses depend on its political, economic and social institutions and on its cultural values. Those institutions and values affect whether the society values (or even tries to solve) its problems." (p.14-15)

Diamond begins with the American state of Montana, a beautiful land, known for its mountains, streams, and prairies, wildlife and rugged individualists. This picture today is deceiving. The environment here has been poisoned by mining operations; salinization is occurring at a rapid rate; and there is a social battle at several levels between residents who wish to retain the old ways and values and others who wish to change the land from predominantly agricultural to residential life depending upon a service economy and tourist trade. Montanans are divided on population growth, governmental regulation and how the land is to be used. It is shocking given the modern changes in economy which proceed apace, that if the state were not part of the United States, it would, according to the author, be a failed state due to the environmental damage, poverty of many of its people, and its dependence on outside assistance in the form of governmental programs.

Diamond's point is that Montana is an example of a drama being reenacted out throughout the world today. However his methodology in the second part is to first delve into the past to examine societies which have been destroyed primarily due to environmental degradation (caused by the factors listed above) or those societies that made crucial, disciplined decisions, which allowed them to survive to this day.

He discusses with rich detail why many societies failed: Easter, Pitcairn and Henderson Island; the Anasazi and Mayan in North and South America, and the Greenland Norse. While examples of harsh climate change caused some irreparable damage, he maintains that often the elements for disruption and disaster were self-caused. Of the Greenland Norse he says, that in addition to some fluctuations in weather cycles, soil erosion caused by overgrazing, failure to adapt to different conditions from those experienced at another place and time, refusal to learn from a successful indigenous people and an inflexible and incompetent power structure which "created a conflict between the short term interests of those in power, and the long term interests of the society as a whole."(p.276)

Part II ends with successful examples of survival: the New Guinea Highlands, where sustainable agriculture has been practiced for over 6000 years, Tikopia, and Japan under the Tokugawa rulers, and others.

The third part is given to describing some modern societies: Rwanda, the Dominican Republic, and Haiti, The People's Republic of China and Australia. Practices for good and ill are discussed and interesting details emerge constantly. The societies examined are all struggling with the effects of growth, globalization and environmental decline. Diamond's tone here is not condemnatory: it is scholarly, seeking to educate and enlighten. He points out many mistakes of the past and present attempts to slow down destructive practices and heal their damage. Of China he says, "China's leaders have been able to solve problems on a scale scarcely possible for European and American leaders: for instance by mandating a one child policy to reduce population growth and by ending logging...On the other hand, China's leaders have also succeeded in creating messes on a scale scarcely possible for European or American leaders...."(p.374) He cites the destruction of the public education system during the cultural revolution and the growing environmental and social problems now emerging. (Public demonstrations have recently led to armed hostilities between villagers and officials over income distribution, and lack of public services.)

Part four, "Practical Lessons," examines the issues of why some societies make bad decisions. He discusses the failure to anticipate, to perceive problems, and rational bad behaviors, and disastrous values. These had been touched on before but here Diamond recapitulates and addresses in detail these factors, as well as other irrational, destructive choices and actions which lead to environmental and societal collapse. Of values he maintains "Perhaps a crux of success or failure as a society is to know which core values to hold on to, and which ones to discard and replace with new values when times change."(p.433) He had illustrated this clearly with the wool industry in Australia, which has largely been given up, in favor of new technologies and less environmentally damaging practices. He concludes with "Signs of Hope" and points out that some societal leaders do rise to the occasion - leaders who have the courage, and are willing

to risk criticism and even failure - to propose sacrifice and hard work to address problems in their nascent stage, before they become intractable. He cites John Kennedy and numerous European leaders and peoples (p.440) for their willingness to take dramatic stands to solve problems, thus leading to greater possibilities for survival.

Diamond spends an incisive chapter on big business and the environment discussing the good, the bad, and the truly ugly. He says "...environmental practices of big businesses are shaped by a fundamental fact that for many of us offends our sense of justice. Depending on the circumstances, a business really may maximize its profits, at least in the short term by damaging the environment and hurting people."(p.483) His effort in this chapter is spent showing examples of good business/environmental practice contrasted with poor ones. (It should be noted that there are businesses which do strive to be good neighbors.) However he concludes astonishingly that since businesses are really there to make money for owners and stockholders, and not to mind the environmental practices of the enlightened, the ultimate responsibility for environmental disaster lies with the public. "In the long run, it is the public, either directly or through its politicians, that has the power to make destructive policies unprofitable and illegal, and to make sustainable environmental policies profitable."(p.484)

This position is mistaken at several levels. First of all it implies companies bear no responsibility for bad practices, that they are 'non-moral actors' and have no responsibility for the consequences of their actions or failures to act, and that simply does not work in the moral and real world. It ignores the principle that truly moral leaders look out for the welfare of their people, environmental sustainability, and the consequences of their actions on the sustainability of future generations.

Secondly, there would be no reason to laud the responsible corporations and politicians (which he does) if their actions were not environmentally respectable - especially as he goes to some pains to show that responsible environmental management has costs, as well.

Finally, it seems quite misplaced to say that citizens - where ever they may be - are consulted/and/or allowed to have the moral/technical input he claims it will take to establish justice and sustainability. Responsible and non-responsible corporations hire professionally trained scientists and technicians to help guide work in the extractive and productive industries, to maximize efficiency and productivity, and hopefully safety and environmental soundness, and to minimize environmental degradation. It is their responsibility along with competent governmental agencies to accomplish this. While it is true cynics and lobbyists - and some politicians - serve some businesses that have no intention to do the right thing - it surely doesn't follow that it is the public's fault that they do not wish to do so!

It is hopefully true that given the right information and opportunity to decide such issues the people may make their voices heard and respected. It is not always so, but it is surely a goal of democracy that it be so. But it is not the case that most of the world's people have ever had such an opportunity. While it may be true that it will be informed, conscientious citizens who finally make the moral weight of environmental

responsibility, sustainability and justice a reality in all such endeavor, it does not follow that the lack of such a state of affairs exonerates malfeasance, degradation, destruction and even murder by those who have been responsible for it.

Diamond concludes with chapter 16, "The World as Polder: What Does It All Mean To Us Today?" He is summing up in an interesting way, and claims that he is a "cautious optimist." (p.521) He cites the Dutch response to disastrous floods in 1953, which killed nearly 2000 citizens. This instigated environmentally, and socially responsible, far-sighted policy for the nation, carried on to this day.

There are he says twelve very critical issues we must face. They are the destruction of natural habitats, including de-forestation; the loss of wild foods, especially fish from increasingly polluted seas, lakes and rivers; loss of biodiversity; enormous loss of soil by natural damage (wind and water) and poor agricultural drainage; the overuse and depletion of major sources of energy; the degradation and loss of fresh water; the loss of available solar energy; the release of toxic chemicals into the total environment; the effects of invasive species on native life; global warming caused by a steady increase of 'greenhouse gasses'; increasing human population with its concomitant requirements for more clean air, water, space etc; and finally the impacts upon the earth and what he sees as the looming conflict between the developed and developing worlds regarding rising expectations.

"Even if the human populations of the Third World did not exist, it would be impossible for the First World alone to maintain its present course, because it is not in a steady state but depleting its own resources as well as those imported from the Third World.... What will happen when it finally dawns on all those people in the Third World that current First World standards are unreachable for them, and that the First World refuses to abandon those standards for itself?"(p.496)

That of course is a major issue and one which many leaders are contemplating: it is also in my opinion why education, discipline and responsible decision making need to come to the fore - not as in my own country, with an over-reliance on market mechanisms to achieve needed reforms and restoration. Notwithstanding any positive use of such market oriented solutions to problems, the market was not designed for this, and these issues are too serious to rely overmuch on such strategies.

I found the middle and final section of this final chapter which Diamond calls "One-liner Objections" and "Reasons for Hope," to be amongst the liveliest and most interesting in the book. Here he examines 'reasons' often advanced to delegitimize environmental concerns.(p.503) Here he seems forthright and at times even adamant. To the claim that we cannot afford good environmental practices, he points out that in the long term it is cheaper and better to avoid illnesses caused by pollution, and asserts "That illustrates why the U.S. Clean Air Act of 1970, although its cleanup measures do cost money, has yielded estimated net health savings (benefits in excess of costs) of about \$1 trillion per year, due to saved lives and reduced health costs."(p.504)

He illustrates the shortcomings of views that new technology will solve our problems, that we have inexhaustible resources, that poverty is a thing of the past, etc.,

with facts, and reasoned responses. To his credit, he states that it is incumbent on the First World citizens to begin making more responsible choices, for environmental responsibility and transgenerational sustainability, and concludes that the “interconnectedness” of the modern world makes it possible for awareness and education regarding these issues, problems, and possible solutions on a scale never before available to man.

Conclusion: I found Collapse to be highly readable, very informative and especially powerful with respect to illustrating the interconnectedness of the problems we face.

Diamond’s choice of failed societies, while not exhaustive seems to illustrate his points well and convincingly. While his work might have been stronger had he examined other well-known societal calamities (e.g., Rome), given his emphasis upon environmental issues and factors, one sees clearly a steady and deadly set of consequences which are either addressed or ignored, to the success or diminishment of the society involved. I was disappointed in his attribution of non-responsibility for corporate polluters, and his misguided comments in this regard: I thought his summary discussion of the major problems we face was very well done, and his answers to objections, powerful, engaging and very appropriate. He addressed major environmental and social issues of the day in some complexity and balance. It is because of this that I recommend this work and indeed have assigned it to my students, with the hope that they will give it the serious attention it and the subject matter deserve.

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